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# Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

John Hope Franklin

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*John Hope Franklin*

LINCOLN'S EVOLVING VIEW OF FREEDOM

A Lecture by Professor John Hope Franklin of  
Duke University at Brown University, November 17, 1984

In 1858 Abraham Lincoln was deeply troubled. He faced a dilemma that threatened to destroy his political future. He believed something that he did not want to believe: that the Constitution of the United States protected the institution of slavery. Even a cursory reading of the document would reveal that slaveholders had the Constitution firmly on their side. Had there been any doubt of that, the Supreme Court had dispelled it the previous year in its decision in the Dred Scott case. If Lincoln had dared say that slavery was illegal and unconstitutional, the wrath of all the slave states and many of the free states would have descended on him. He was such a constitutionalist himself, however, that he could entertain no such thoughts. He could say, and he did say, that he thought the decision in the Dred Scott case was erroneous; and since the Court had often overruled itself, he hoped it would do so in this case. He was revolted by the Court's insistence that Negroes were not citizens, could not become citizens, and that Congress could not prohibit slavery, even in the territories. He was sufficiently shrewd as a politician not to belabor these points, for national sentiment seemed to favor some kind of peaceful settlement of the slave question. If he exhibited

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